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Summary record of the 18th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 17 November 1997, at 11 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. Mapuranga ..... (Zimbabwe)

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The meeting was called to order at 11.35 a.m.

Agenda item 89: questions relating to information
(A/52/21 and A/52/455 and Corr.1;
A/AC.198/1997/L.1/Rev.1, L.2 and L.3)

1. **The Chairman** said that at its meeting earlier that morning the Committee on Information had adopted its draft report, which would be issued as document A/52/21, and he drew the Fourth Committee's attention to documents A/AC.198/1997/L.1/Rev.1, L.2 and L.3, which contained the report in question.

2. **Mr. Skrypko** (Belarus), Rapporteur, introduced the report of the Committee on Information and drew the Fourth Committee's attention to the two draft resolutions recommended by the Committee on Information for adoption by the General Assembly. He briefly reviewed the content of the sections of the report and noted that the main thrust of the debate at the nineteenth session of the Committee on Information had focused on the reform of United Nations public information activities, in particular the Secretary-General's proposals for their reorientation. Understanding the need for reform of the United Nations, the members of the Committee on Information had emphasized that the views of the Member States should be sought on any changes in public information activities. Many delegations had pointed out that, for the sake of transparency in the reform process, there should be close cooperation between the Committee on Information and the Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities. It was felt that the reforms should not lead to any shrinkage or elimination of the programmes and activities of the Department of Public Information (DPI) already mandated by the General Assembly before the general membership had been thoroughly consulted on the matter. Many speakers had also stated that before the Department's structure and activities were altered and before it was reorganized into a new Office for Communications and Public Information consultations must be held with the Member States and they must be informed about the reasoning behind any proposals for change.

3. On the subject of the United Nations information centres, many delegations had supported the preservation and strengthening of that important tool of global outreach and had argued against any resource reductions which would impair the information programmes carried out by the centres. Some delegations had supported the integration of the centres with UNDP field offices, but others had highlighted a number of problems which such a move would pose.

4. In the general debate members of the Committee had also stated their Government's dedication to freedom of the press and freedom of information, which were fundamental factors in securing democracy and development. Many speakers had pointed to the continuing importance of establishing a new world information order based on a free and balanced flow of information in a world where the information gap between the developed and the developing countries was constantly widening.

5. During the consideration of the future programme of work some members of the Committee had expressed doubts about its existing working methods, arguing that some of the decisions on substantive issues should be taken in the plenary Committee and not in the group composed of the regional groups, the Group of 77 and China, and the members of the Bureau. However, other delegations had pointed out that the group's work had been conducted in an open and transparent manner, which had ensured the success of its work and the preservation of consensus in the Committee.

6. At its resumed nineteenth session, the Committee had considered the Secretary-General's proposals regarding measures affecting the reorientation of United Nations public information activities; it had also considered the report of the Task Force.

7. Since the Committee had felt that it needed more time to study the documents before it, it had decided to suspend the session to allow for consultations. Following several rounds of consultations conducted by the Chairman of the Committee two draft resolutions had been prepared: they were contained in documents A/AC.198/1997/L.2 and L.3.

8. Since part IV of the report had only just been adopted, document A/AC.198/1997/L.1/Rev.1, now before the Committee, did not reflect the oral amendments made at that morning's meeting of the Committee on Information, he read out the drafting changes to paragraphs 63, 64, 67-70 and 73.

9. **Mr. Sanbar** (Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information) noted that it was generally accepted that information was an essential element for decision-making and mobilizing public opinion. However, a better understanding of the essence of the United Nations and its activities amongst a wider audience could be achieved only by combining efforts on the basis of close partnership. To expand the potential audience, the Organization was using not only its six official languages but also other languages spoken by peoples around the world.

10. The pivotal role that information played in the unprecedented process of reform and the profound changes

which the United Nations was undergoing could not be overemphasized. If peoples did not receive relevant information on what the Organization was doing to improve their lives, support for the Organization would erode. Information work must have a tangible impact on public perceptions of United Nations activities, and the United Nations message must also be heard by non-governmental organizations, the academic community and influential groups in the private sector. In an increasingly saturated information field, it was extremely important for United Nations public information to be of high quality and well focused so that its relevance was clear and understandable. It was necessary to work with the media as potential allies, reacting dynamically to their criticisms and making proactive efforts to clarify issues of serious concern that were placed before the global public. At the same time, accuracy must not suffer. It should not be forgotten that the value of information lay not in what was said, but in what was understood.

11. Mindful of the changes in the outside world, the Department was continuing to examine ways to strengthen the Organization's information capacity in the field by forging links with local communities. In the field, as at Headquarters, the focus must be on the relevance and transparency of the Organization and its responsiveness to the political, economic and social currents of the time.

12. Every information programme and activity must be thoroughly and regularly evaluated, and cost-effectiveness was the key. In recent years, the Department had made conscious efforts to strengthen its professionalism, forge strong media partnerships, develop key audiences, optimize programme delivery and streamline its management structure. As well as developing relationships with the media and non-governmental organizations around the world, the Department was deepening its partnerships with other subdivisions of the United Nations system.

13. Because of the multifaceted and dynamic nature of information operations, Member States needed to play an active role in the team effort of taking the United Nations message to wider, more diverse audiences around the world. The need to generate informed public opinion in support of the United Nations had never been greater, and that daunting task could be accomplished only if everyone took part in the joint effort.

14. The Department currently had a greater outreach capacity than ever before. A number of initiatives in that area had been launched. Thus, for the first time since its creation, the number of accesses on the United Nations home page on the Internet had passed the million-per-week mark and was continuing to grow. In radio, a successful series of international live broadcasts had been started. A memorandum of understanding had been signed with China to broadcast the Department's radio and television programmes. In television, the weekly three-minute telecast broadcast through CNN and other companies was currently reaching an audience of some 200 million in 106 countries. The United Nations World Television Forum would be important in enhancing the partnership between the Organization and television broadcasters.

15. In the ongoing process of reform, the role of public information had finally gained long-overdue recognition. The Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities had noted the need to place communications functions at the heart of the strategic management of the Organization. As the report of the Secretary-General (A/52/455) indicated in paragraphs 7 to 11, the task of the proposed Office for Communications and Public Information would be to elaborate on the agreed proposals and to implement them in a professional manner. In that connection, it should be noted that, with the active participation of the staff and in close collaboration with the Committee on Information, much had already been done to formulate a dynamic and focused plan of action for information that would meet the ever-evolving needs of the international community.

16. Positive signs of recognition were being given within the Secretariat to the central role of information and communication in the work of the Organization. The Secretary-General had reaffirmed the need to create a culture of communications throughout the Organization, with responsibility for public diplomacy being borne by all senior officials, ambassadors and the larger United Nations family. The Organization's capacity to communicate effectively and meaningfully at the country level through local partnerships must be strengthened. It was also important to strengthen the partnerships with the other agencies in the system, and in that connection he welcomed the fact that the Assistant Director-General of the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization was taking part in the meeting.

17. **Mr. Yushkiavitshus** (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) said that the two items on freedom of expression and the emerging information society had been high on the agenda of the UNESCO General Conference, which had concluded its work a week earlier. There had been unanimous support for the role played by UNESCO in defending the free flow of information, freedom of expression, freedom of the press and pluralistic and independent media. The General Conference had also endorsed the outcomes of the regional seminars on

a free and pluralistic press organized by UNESCO in conjunction with the Department of Public Information in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Arab region and Europe. The General Conference had underlined the role of free media as an integral part of freedom of expression, which was the cornerstone of any democracy. There had been overall agreement among the participants in the General Conference that freedom of expression was crucial for all the emerging types of information and communication which, as a result of new technological applications, were creating an information society.

18. Referring to article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he said that, in a changing communication and information environment, there was a temptation to introduce controls over access to information or its content. It was important to remember that the UNESCO Constitution provided not only for the free flow of ideas by word and image, but also for the free exchange of ideas and knowledge. The realization of those goals might be hampered only by a lack of political will or repressive attitudes but also by a lack of modern equipment, channels of distribution and professional experience. In order to overcome those obstacles, UNESCO, through its International Programme for the Development of Communication, was seeking to narrow the gap between developing and developed countries. Since the establishment of the Programme, 650 projects had been implemented in more than 100 countries at a cost of $77 million. Priority was given to developing countries, and UNESCO supported the training of specialists in the fields of communication and information.

19. If information was power, then access to information was the road to empowerment, and that was why UNESCO firmly opposed any attempts to limit the flow of information. During the cold war, it had been proposed that imbalances in information flows should be redressed not by improving such flows but by limiting them; that approach had been embodied in the so-called "new world information and communication order". The sterile political battle had prevented UNESCO from carrying out practical programmes, activities and projects that would have helped redress the imbalance of information flow. UNESCO had overcome that crisis in 1989, when the General Conference had unanimously adopted a new communication strategy, which aimed to encourage the free flow of information and its wider and better balanced dissemination without any obstacle to freedom of expression.

20. The recent UNESCO General Conference had expressed great concern that violence against journalists was widespread and frequently went unpunished. Over the past 10 years, more than 600 journalists had been killed. The General Conference had therefore adopted its resolution 120, which reaffirmed the rights to life and to personal freedom and integrity, the assurance of security and the protection of the law, and freedom of expression were fundamental human rights that were recognized and guaranteed by international conventions and instruments. The resolution also stated that the assassination of journalists not only deprived people of their lives but also was a violation of the right to freedom of expression that limited the freedoms and rights of society as a whole. In that resolution, the General Conference requested the authorities to discharge their duty of preventing, investigating and punishing such crimes.

21. At the end of the twentieth century, the press enjoyed greater freedom than ever before, and it was extremely important to learn how to handle that freedom. Many political groups preached freedom of the press while they were in the opposition. When they came to power, they had to learn how to work with the media, while respecting their independence. Journalists, for their part, had to learn how to strengthen their independence from the authorities. They needed to learn how to use public and private sources of information accurately, and the observance of journalistic ethics was very important in that regard.

22. With regard to the ongoing reform of the United Nations system, the General Conference had emphasized the importance of inter-agency cooperation with a view to maximizing the use of human and technical resources. It was to be hoped that UNESCO, as in the past, could count on the Fourth Committee's support.

23. **Ms. Backes** (Luxembourg), speaking on behalf of the European Union and associated countries, said that the European Union was convinced of the need for the United Nations to retain its unique role in the world. The reorganization of information services and the adoption of a comprehensive communication strategy were important elements of the current reform process, which aimed to strengthen the Organization's role as an active and effective international forum, avoid past mistakes and in the interest of accomplishing tasks in connection with the approaching twenty-first century.

24. The European Union agreed with the conceptual approach and general orientation of the recommendations made by the Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities in its report entitled "Global vision, local voice: a strategic communications programme for the United Nations". One of the recommendations concerned the importance of placing the communications function at the heart of the strategic

management of the Organization. The European Union supported, in particular, the proposal made by the Secretary-General to the Committee on Information on 3 September 1997. On the whole, the European Union welcomed the Secretary-General's efforts to broaden the support that the United Nations enjoyed in the world.

25. **Mr. Santaputra** (Thailand) said that there was a need to reorientate the Organization's capacity in the field of communications and public information in order to make it more effective and better geared to targeted audiences. The United Nations should reach out not only to Governments but also to the general public around the world. There had recently been many efforts in that area and it was interesting to note that, in his report entitled "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform" (A/51/950), the Secretary-General concurred with the recommendations contained in the report of the Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities.

26. Thailand supported the proposal contained in paragraph 51 of the Secretary-General's report that all United Nations entities with ongoing missions at the country level, including information centres, should operate in common premises. Such integration should, however, be carried out on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the unique character of each country and the views of the host country. In Thailand, there was probably widespread knowledge about the United Nations among interested government officials, those directly affected, the educated and the English-reading public, but not among the bulk of the general public. The remedy could be found largely in the recruitment of more local staff to work in the information centres. In that connection, his delegation welcomed paragraph 10 of the Secretary-General's report (A/52/455 and Corr.1) and noted that the United Nations could use regional commissions around the world as regional hubs for communication services at the country level in support of communication activities in each country through already existing United Nations information centres, as well as in those countries where there were no established United Nations information centres for their respective regions.

27. **Mr. Moubarak** (Lebanon) said that his delegation had taken note of all the reports that the Secretary-General had submitted to the Committee, particularly the information contained in his report on the work of the United Nations (A/52/1). Information was a means of promoting education and the dissemination of knowledge about various cultures and was a way to strengthen mutual understanding between peoples. The United Nations was at the very centre of all information activities.

28. His delegation agreed that many permanent missions to the United Nations no longer needed postal or facsimile services to transmit extremely important documents to their ministries. That would undoubtedly result in a substantial savings. It was important that national and regional offices of the United Nations should encourage Governments to participate in the implementation of programmes involving the use of new technology. Information played an important role in ensuring support for United Nations activities, particularly peacekeeping. His delegation considered that the use of information technology should become an integral part of peacekeeping activities. Radio broadcasting should also be widely used to disseminate information on the activities of international peacekeeping forces. Information centres should be encouraged to participate in activities in the field in accordance with General Assembly decisions. That would help to strengthen cooperation between various offices, national organizations and other bodies of the United Nations system, in order to promote the Organization's reform efforts.

The meeting rose at 12.45 p.m.